

...Unanswered Questions

With the opening of the Ervin committee hearings today, the nation carries forward the task—already under way in several grand jury rooms—of sorting out truth from rumor about the interlocking crimes and conspiracies known as Watergate. Public testimony by many witnesses over the coming weeks may illuminate the role of one man not likely to be called as a witness, President Nixon.

The President's address to the nation on April 30 clearly failed to resolve the gathering doubts about that role. His subsequent speech at a Republican fundraising dinner in Washington only made matters worse. He has avoided holding a press conference where he could be questioned. Yet silence and a determined attempt to carry on public business as if nothing had happened are not convincing or reassuring. The questions accumulate.

What took place between the President and John N. Mitchell, his former Attorney General and most trusted political confidant, during the two-hour conference last July 1 which preceded Mr. Mitchell's resignation as campaign manager? That was two weeks after the Watergate burglars were arrested. The involvement of some officials of the Committee for the Re-election of the President was already becoming apparent.

Did President Nixon fire Mr. Mitchell because of the bungled Watergate break-in? Did Mr. Mitchell remove himself for public relations purposes but continue to keep effective control over the committee's operations? Did Mr. Mitchell tell the President during that conference what he knew about Mr. Liddy, Mr. Hunt and the other Watergate operators? If not, why not? When did the President first learn that Liddy and Hunt had been on the White House payroll performing undercover missions?

Next, there are the mysterious telephone calls last July to and from L. Patrick Gray 3d, the acting director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Mr. Gray, distraught because of the interference of White House aides in the F.B.I.'s investigation, called Clark MacGregor, the successor to Mr. Mitchell as campaign manager, and warned him that Watergate might be much more serious than anyone thought.

Whether Mr. MacGregor told that to the President is unclear, but soon thereafter Mr. Nixon and Mr. Gray had a telephone conversation. The latter told the President he was "confused" about the intervention of White House aides. If Mr. Gray's account is correct, Mr. Nixon did not ask him for details. He merely told him to carry on the investigation and ended the conversation. Why did the President not express curiosity about something obviously worrying his inexperienced appointee at the F.B.I.?

A third set of questions concerns the Watergate investigation supposed to have been carried on by John W. Dean 3d, the President's counsel. Mr. Nixon referred to Mr. Dean's "complete investigation" as the basis for his assertion at a news conference last Aug. 29 that no one then employed at the White House was involved in the Watergate case.

It now appears, according to Mr. Dean, that he never made any investigation, never submitted any report written or oral to the President. It further appears, according to unidentified White House sources, that President Nixon relied upon an oral report from John D. Ehrlichman who was Mr. Dean's superior, in that remarkably narrow hierarchy of authority at the White House. What is the truth about "the Dean investigation"? Did Mr. Dean mislead Mr. Ehrlichman, or did Mr. Ehrlichman mislead the President?

A fourth set of questions arises from the activities of Dwight Chapin, the President's appointments secretary, and Herbert Kalmbach, the President's personal attorney. Mr. Kalmbach raised large sums in cash, some of which he dispensed, on Mr. Chapin's instructions, to the head of a network of political saboteurs. In view of Mr. Kalmbach's lawyer-client relationship with the President and in view of his long personal and political association with him, would he have engaged in such activities unless he was certain that they had the President's approval? Has the President ever discussed these matters with Mr. Kalmbach? When Mr. Chapin unexpectedly resigned last winter from his prestigious White House post to take a lower-paid job in private industry, did not Mr. Nixon experience any surprise at his departure?

If President Nixon were the kind of man who, like General Eisenhower, had little interest in the details of politics or, like President Harding, were unintelligent, some of these questions would not arise. But Mr. Nixon is an able lawyer quite familiar from the Hiss investigation with the work of the F.B.I. and of criminal prosecutors. He has an omnivorous taste for political information and a feeling for the nuances of power. He is not an ignorant or careless man.

The hearings of the Ervin committee and the work of the grand juries may unravel some of these mysteries. But until these questions—and many more like them—are answered, the public cannot be satisfied that the whole truth has been learned.